ST FRANCIS XAVIER PRIMARY SCHOOL, GERALDTON

Background
In 2009 it was noted that the school’s playgrounds were worn, rusty and unable to cater for the growing needs and interests of students. Parent, teacher and School Board member, Fiona Angelatos, had noted the play spaces in Steiner schools were constructed of natural materials in keeping with the local environment and were of be-spoke design. The combination of higher play value and safety compliance was researched.

“\textit{My wish is for... a place I can make cubbies, a garden to sit in, a quiet place to be alone, rocks for climbing on, a long slippery slide, a vegie patch, dunes to roll down, a pond, shady trees, flowers to smell...}”

Some ideas provided by Year 1-6 students at St Francis Xavier Primary School when asked about their ideal play space.

Typical of most schools, ours had vast areas of lawn and some isolated playgrounds and sandpits. Whilst providing high energy play opportunities there was little scope for children to engage in creative or exploratory play. There was little range in textures, scents, sounds, surfaces; few places to engage curiosity; and no places for solitary or quiet play. Conversations with the Principal, Therese Asplin, and school community parents drew support for the development of new, fun, natural play spaces. Students were consulted for ideas and schools with similar play spaces were contacted for ideas and feedback. A committee was formed and a project was proposed to the School Board, Parent and Friends body (P&F) and school staff.

Making the dream a reality
Photos of local and international examples of natural play spaces; sample design plans; and a summary of research were provided at meetings, information sessions and on mobile display boards around the school. Comparisons were made between conventional pre-fabricated playgrounds and natural ones, and the latter were found to be of greater cost-benefit and to have higher play opportunities. With the support of the school community and an initial fee of $1500, design plans were created by Bernhard Kaiser, Perth-based owner of Natural Play Solutions, using site photos and an ideas/wish list. The P&F committed funds for construction of five new playgrounds to be built over as many years.

Grant opportunities were sought to no avail so the committee developed a fundraising programme that included: a sponsorship project whereby families donated and gained publicity through the school website, newsletter and plaque recognition; P&F fundraising activities and an inventory of families and businesses who would donate in-kind support.
Whilst this process was underway, the committee implemented immediate strategies to increase play opportunities. Costumes and second-hand clothing were gathered for dressing up and role playing opportunities; baskets of used kitchen implements and digging sand construction materials (pipes, spades etc) were collected; blackboard donations were sought and mounted on walls throughout the school, and traditional schoolyard games like ‘elastics’ were inspiration for parents to make up sets and then teach the game during play breaks.

“A playground should be like a small-scale replica of the world, with as many as possible of the sensory experiences to be found in the world included in it”. (Dattner. 1969)

The resulting play spaces

In 2010, Bernhard constructed ‘Southgates’ with assistance of the school groundsman and parents, and then followed in 2011 with ‘Chapman Valley’. The following materials were donated to reduce the playgrounds’ costs to construction fees and other materials: limestone blocks, rock boulders, a large tree log with accompanying truck and crane, a used rubber conveyor belt and tyres. Bernhard used logs sourced from remnant school bush and adjusted the playgrounds to fit with existing buildings and play sites. Students were also involved in garden planting and helping create a mosaic area, with parent volunteers.

The Southgates playground, designed for senior students incorporates elements for climbing (tree log and branch construction, rope bridge and ‘wobble walk’), for swinging (circle tyre swing), for exploration (‘talking pipe’ connecting underground by two speaking tube-ends) and for socialising (wall seating, circle tyre swing).

The Chapman Valley playground incorporates play opportunities for junior students such as water play (pump, channels, mud dish), sand play (chutes, scoops, sieves), music play (pipes, thongaphone, bells, mini-orb), climbing (logs, tyres), exploring (wall with cut outs and coloured glass bricks, ‘talking pipe’, native plants attracting insects and birds).

The school looks forward to the construction of the remaining three play spaces. These will include a music and gathering area for senior students; while for younger students one playground will have nooks and crannies of ‘grown’ (vine covered) cubby houses and another with contemplative spaces built in labyrinth style.

Prepared by: Fiona Angelatos, Coordinator Regional Operations, Mid West Education Regional Office, April 2013.
For more information please see: WEBLINK